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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this pilot study is to describe the Communications English (CE) program that was designed to help underachievers gain competence in communications skills. The subjects were 75 tenth graders assigned to three CE classes and 75 Regent English (State recommended English syllabus) tenth grade students. Based on diagnosis of pretest scores, an instructional prescription was prepared for each CE student. As the student progressed through different materials, his prescription was updated and adjusted to his needs. Multimedia instruments such as controlled readers, tachistoscopes, and cassette players were used to set up learning stations. Data pertaining to the improvement of reading, writing, and listening skills are: (1) the Nelson-Denny Reading Test indicated increase from the pre and posttest scores, (2) the Brown-Carlson Listening Test indicated a jump from the 42nd to the 52nd percentile, (3) improvement in the area of writing, (4) a grade improvement from the ninth year in school, and (5) CE students, teachers, and parents exhibited a positive attitude toward the program. Findings indicate that a program that involves students in their own learning environment holds much promise and the success of CE would indicate more testing of its effectiveness. (WR)

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COMMUNICATIONS ENGLISH -
A SUCCESSFUL LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

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The communication skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking have long been recognized as prime educational objectives. Although educational researchers during the last thirty years have focused on one or more of these important skills, relatively few studies have served to point the way toward more effective programs at the secondary level. In the area of reading, for example, Robinson (2) summarizes the upper level reading instruction in the sixties by stating that "it is apparent that few innovations or marked changes have occurred in reading instruction beyond the primary grades."

A possible exception to this indictment is a recent study* by Ferris (1), who demonstrated that materials and procedures based on a self-instructional approach could be designed to improve critical reading skills and to foster understanding of specific propaganda devices. This approach also improved, though not significantly, the general reading skills of the eleventh grade students involved in the study. The self-instructional approach with its emphasis upon active and responsible student involvement seemed to work especially well with the low average (I.Q. range from 89 to 104 on the

* This study was selected as one of six outstanding Dissertations at the International Reading Association Convention at Atlantic City, April, 1971. It will be published in an IRA volume tentatively entitled "Preparation of Reading Teachers" edited by Howard Klien.

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Otis-Lennon) and high average (I.Q. range from 105 to 116) students. The study further demonstrated that materials and techniques emphasizing skill development could be successfully incorporated into specific units of the high school English curriculum such as the study of the essay and the mass media. Though called upon to assume new and demanding roles as resource people, diagnosticians, and counselors, the teachers involved in the study reacted favorably to the self-instruction approach.

The success of this small (N=99) but carefully controlled study, conducted in the spring of 1969 in two middle class suburban schools in the Rochester, New York area, lead to the consideration that a language arts program modeled on self-instructional principles and practices could be a possible solution to a problem of long standing in Spencerport High School. This problem centered on the so-called "underachiever," the student of apparently average or above ability who is deficient in communication skills as indicated by standardized test scores and who performs poorly in English classes as evidenced by low grades. In the usual classroom characterized by lectures, assignments and supervision in which the teacher plays a central role and the students, in contrast, a more passive role, these students tend to be bored and indifferent. The success of self-instruction in the Ferris study suggests its possible use for improving the communications skills of tenth grade students.

Purposes

The main purpose of this pilot study is to describe the Communications English program that was designed to help underachieving high school students gain greater competence in communications skills. Data were obtained

and presented to determine if the program helped to achieve these objectives:

1. To improve general reading abilities - vocabulary, rate and comprehension.
2. To improve critical reading abilities.
3. To improve listening skills.
4. To improve writing skills.
5. To develop more positive attitudes toward communication skills, especially reading.

The second main purpose of the study was to determine how students, teachers, and parents reacted to the Communications English program.

Definitions of Terms

Communications English, hereafter referred to as C/E, is a Regents-level English program, grades 10-12. The general aim of this experimental program is to develop competencies in the language arts rather than mastery of subject matter. The emphasis is on the process skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. The content for developing these communication skills were drawn from the three main components of the language arts--literature, composition, and language. An integral aspect of the instructional situation is the Communications Center that houses multi-level and multi-media materials.

Regents English is an administrative term used in New York State to designate those students who follow the State recommended English syllabus. Typically Regents classes include students with a broad spectrum of abilities ranging from approximately 90 to 130⁺ as measured by the Otis-Lennon Mental Ability Test. These students comprise approximately 70-80 per cent

of the secondary school population.

Self-instruction is defined as an instructional approach that actively and responsibly involves the student in his own learning activities. Characteristically it allows the student (1) to proceed at his own pace through a learning sequence, (2) to select his own instructional media or pattern, and (3) to participate in his own assessment.

Limitations

This study has two basic limitations that restrict its power of generalization. First, the students were not randomly assigned to the Communications English classes. They were selected for this innovative program on the basis that they might profit from a more student-centered program. Second, without randomization appropriate control groups could not be set up. For purposes of clarification and analysis, however, three Regents classes were selected to be studied in conjunction with this project. This then is a pilot study utilizing a one-group design with pre and post testing. It was conducted as an in-service project involving a group of concerned teachers in designing, implementing, and evaluating an innovative language arts program.

THE METHOD

Target Population

The research for this study was conducted during the 1970-71 school year in Spencerport High School, a suburban high school in the Rochester, New York area. The students in the Communications English classes were selected on the bases of these criteria: They were of average and above-average ability (I.Q. range from 87 to 125 on the Otis-Lennon Mental Ability Test); they appeared to be underachieving and unmotivated in English as

indicated by poor grades and lack of interest in the regular English Regents program; and they appeared to be deficient in communication skills, especially reading and writing, as indicated by standardized tests.

The students used in the pilot program were approximately 75 tenth graders who were assigned to three Communications English classes. For comparison purposes there were also approximately 75 Regents students assigned to three classes at the tenth grade level. The students in the Regents classes were selected on the bases of their being taught by the same teachers in the pilot program or by teachers of similar background who were teaching Regents classes at the same time.

Independent Variable

Communications English is a secondary language arts program designed to develop competencies in the skill areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking. The content for developing these communication skills was drawn from literature, composition and language. In each of these areas, the students studied with a different subject matter specialist each thirteen weeks. They focused in particular on ways of acquiring information and on major concepts in each division. In the literature component, for example, specific comprehension and critical reading skills were identified and emphasized in conjunction with the reading of short stories, essays and lyric poetry.

Depending on their diagnosed needs, the students pursued their individual objectives in one or more phases - skill development, core concepts or individual study as indicated in Table 1.

TABLE 1
MODEL FOR COMMUNICATIONS ENGLISH

Phase 3	Independent Work
Phase 2	Core Concepts
Phase 1	Basic and/or Advanced Skills

An integral part of the instructional situation was the Communications Center that was housed in a 24' by 32' classroom where thirteen wet carrels were installed. In these learning stations there were multi-media instruments such as controlled readers, tachistoscopes, and cassette players. Materials on a wide variety of topics and on many levels of difficulty were available for individual use.

At the beginning of the year and at the beginning of each thirteen week sequence, the students were pretested by means of standardized and informal instruments to determine specific skill needs in each of the major areas. Based upon a diagnosis of his scores, an instructional prescription was prepared for each student. Though the pattern varied, each student was scheduled into the Center to work on his individual program to improve his skills. Each student had his own folder on file in the Center to record his progress. In this folder was his prescription sheet detailing his exact program. As the student progressed through different materials, his prescription was updated and adjusted to his current needs. In all phases of instruction the student played an active role in the se-

lecting of objectives and materials as well as in the evaluation of his progress.

Instruments and Statistical Analysis

To measure achievement in general reading, the Nelson-Denny Reading Test was used: Form A for the pretest and Form B for the posttest. The Watson Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, Form Ym for the pretest and Form Zm for the posttest, was used to measure critical reading. In the area of composition the STEP Essay Test, Level 2, was used to measure achievement in writing. Form 2C was used as the pretest and Form 2B as the posttest. Two experienced English teachers from outside the school system with special interest and competence in writing (one had experience as an editor of a journal and the other had been an advisor to a school newspaper in a neighboring school) were trained to correct the essays according to the procedures outlined in the STEP Handbook for Essay Tests. The tests were coded so that the examiners were not aware of either the students (C/E or Regents) or whether the tests were pretests or posttests.

To measure growth in listening, the Brown-Carlson Listening Comprehension Test was used: Form Am for the pretest and Form Bm for the posttest. A student reaction questionnaire, developed by the investigator, was used to measure the subjects' attitude toward reading. A questionnaire was also developed and administered at the end of the first trimester and at the end of the year to determine the C/E students' reactions to the Communications English program. Reactions of teachers and parents to the program were also obtained and analyzed. An investigation of grade averages received by the experimental subjects in both their ninth year and tenth

year was also made.

Since this is a pilot study, it was not considered appropriate to run tests of significance. Rather the data are presented graphically, using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

The data yielded by the various instruments used in this study are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
STATISTICAL SUMMARY

High School Grade 10 C/E (Total)		N=69		October, 1971	
I.Q. (Otis-Lennon)	Mean: <u>102</u>	<u>55</u> tile	Range: <u>84-121</u>		
	<u>Mean</u>		<u>Change</u>	<u>Range</u>	
	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>		<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>
	(Percentiles)				
General Reading (Nelson-Denny Reading Test)					
Vocabulary	46	68	+22	6-69	15-99
Comprehension	37	52	+15	3-81	14-95
Rate (WPM)	230	253	+23	68-570	75-488
Total	41	64	+23	2-94	20-99
Critical Reading (Watson-Glaser Crit. Thinking Appraisal)	29	43	+14	1-72	1-92
Critical Listening (Brown-Carlson List. Test)	42	52	+10	1-96	2-97
Attitude (Ferris)	56	61	+ 5	26-80	42-80
Student Evaluation (Ferris)					
General	Negative <u>13</u>	Same <u>20</u>	Positive <u>67</u>		
Specific	Negative <u>19</u>	Positive <u>81</u>			

As indicated by the Otis-Lennon Mental Ability Test, the mean I.Q. of the C/E group was 102 with a range from 84 to 121. This indication of ability contrasts with the mean I.Q. of 113 with a range of 91 to 140 for students in the three Regents classes and a mean I.Q. of 108.02 with a standard deviation of 12.96 for the entire tenth grade population.

C/E was designed to develop competence in the communication skills. In particular the program was intended to improve reading, writing and listening skills. Data pertaining to the achievement of these objectives are as follows:

1. In the area of reading, results obtained from the Nelson-Denny Reading Test indicated definite improvement. In total reading the pretest score was at the 41st percentile and the posttest score at the 64th percentile, an increase of 23 percentile points. In vocabulary and in comprehension, the group also appeared to make considerable progress. In the more complex area of critical reading, this group did not achieve grade level proficiency (50th percentile) but did make a noticeable improvement from the 29th percentile to the 43rd percentile, a 14 percentile point increase.
2. Scores obtained from the Brown-Carlson Listening Test also indicated a noticeable jump from the 42nd percentile to the 52nd percentile, a 10 point percentile improvement.
3. In the area of writing the mean pretest score of the C/E students on the STEP Essay Test, based on a seven point scale, was 2.2 with a range from 1 to 5. In the publisher's norm table a score

of 2.2 represents a converted score of 276 and a percentile band of 15 to 61. On the posttest the mean score was 2.8 with a range from 1 to 6. This represents a converted score of 285 and a percentile band of 30 to 77. Though the results are not dramatic, the change is in the right direction.

4. At the end of their first year in C/E the mean grade average of the C/E students in English, on a five point scale, was 3.2 (C) with a range from 1.0 to 5. In all their subjects their mean average was 3.1 (C) with a range from 1.1 to 4.2. These grades contrast with their ninth year English grades of 2.5 (D) with a range from 1.0 to 4.2 and their overall average in all subjects of 2.4 (D) with a range from 1.0 to 4.1. These scores represent a full grade improvement from their ninth year in school.
5. On a ten item attitude questionnaire in which weighted scores below 60 represent negative responses and scores beyond 60 represent positive responses, the mean pretest score of the C/E students was 56 with a range from 1 to 96. On the posttest there was a change to a slightly positive 61 with a range from 2 to 97.
6. Results of questionnaires administered to the C/E students at the end of the first thirteen week period and at the end of the year were highly positive. The students responded anonymously to such items as how much they enjoyed C/E, how much they learned in C/E, how involved they were, and how much individual attention they received in contrast to other English classes. Responses to these general impressions were as follows:

Positive - 67 per cent
The Same - 20 per cent
Negative - 13 per cent

The students also responded to specific aspects of the program such as the thirteen-week time blocks, the changing of teachers, the Communications Center, and to specific materials in the Center such as controlled readers, films, tapes, kits. Reactions were highly favorable as evidenced by these responses:

Negative - 19 per cent
Positive - 81 per cent

7. Though finding their new teaching roles difficult at times, the three teachers involved in C/E reacted very positively to the program. These teachers felt that they were able to accomplish more with their students, mentioning in particular the weak, the average, and the unmotivated. They liked specializing in one area of English and the opportunities both in the classroom and in the Communications Center to individualize instruction. Initially they found it difficult to diagnose student needs and write specific instructional prescriptions. They also found it difficult to keep track of each student's progress. In spite of these difficulties, the C/E team concluded one of their reports in these words:

"We, the teachers and students, like Communications English! We are always modifying programs and approaches. Our success this year is causing us to expand the program to the eleventh year."

8. At various times the parents of the C/E students were involved in the project. Before the final selection of students, an orientation for prospective students and their parents was held.

Early in the first thirteen-week block of time and at the end of the year, review sessions for parents were also scheduled. In addition a short questionnaire was mailed at the end of the year to all parents of the C/E students. Data received from approximately one-third of the parents corroborated the highly favorable reactions of teachers and students. The parents in particular indicated that their children, as compared with other English classes, enjoyed and were more involved in C/E.

DISCUSSION

In any discussion of this study it is essential to keep in mind that it does not fulfill the requirements of an experimental study. As a pilot study, however, it may suggest some insights into an innovative language arts program. These insights are, more properly, observations that may or may not hold up under more rigorous research conditions.

Observations

1. The students in the C/E program were selected on the bases that they were underachieving, lacking in skills, and unmotivated. When we consider their ability (mean I.Q. of 102), in comparison with the students in the Regents classes (mean I.Q. of 113), and in comparison with the whole tenth grade population (mean I.Q. of 108), it appears that the term underachiever is a misnomer. When given an opportunity to function at a level commensurate with their ability, in materials of interest to them, and in a manner that actively involved them, they appeared to achieve quite well.

2. C/E was designed to develop competence in communications skills.

In terms of the skill objectives, the program appears to have worked well. In reading and listening the pretest scores of the C/E students fell considerably below the 50th percentile, a reasonable standard of performance for students of average ability. On the posttest the C/E students surpassed the 50th percentile in both general reading (64th percentile) and listening (52nd percentile). Improvement was also noted in critical reading and writing.

3. Whatever the reason - improvement in communication skills, more involvement, maturity, or more success - or, more likely, combinations of reasons, the C/E students performed better not only in English but in all their classes.
4. In the affective area also there appeared to be more positive reactions of the C/E students toward their instruction, reading in particular. They responded favorably to working with tapes, controlled readers, and film strips. They enjoyed working in small groups or individually both in the Communications Center and in the classroom. Involving students actively and responsibly in all phases of their instruction, from the selection of objectives and materials to the evaluation of their progress, may be one of the key factors influencing the results of this study.
5. Though burdened at times, the teachers found their new roles as diagnosticians, counselors, and resource persons both satisfying and challenging. They reported in particular that they were able to individualize and accomplish more with the so-called average

and unmotivated learner. The active participation of teachers from the early design stage through implementation and assessment seems extremely important to the success of an innovative program, especially where the teacher is called upon to assume new and difficult roles.

Communications English was designed for a specific group of supposedly underachieving, unmotivated secondary English students. Findings from this pilot study seem to indicate that a program that actively and responsibly involves students in their own learning environment holds much promise. The apparent success of Communications English would seem to justify a more rigorous test of its effectiveness.

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